

BECOMING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHER: THE IMPACT OF CLINICAL EXPERIENCES IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study focuses on elementary and secondary teacher candidates' perspectives of how their clinical experiences influence their preparedness in becoming effective culturally responsive educators. Clinical experiences in urban schools embedded within teacher preparation programs have the potential to develop students' ability to become culturally responsive educators, yet it is unknown how these experiences contribute to teachers' development in enacting culturally responsive pedagogy. Qualitative data was collected through open-ended survey responses and focus groups with teacher candidates in urban focused elementary and secondary teacher education programs at one college of education. Findings indicated that connecting with students' cultures and communities, the school/classroom context, and university-school partnerships and alignment impacted teacher candidates' feelings of preparedness on becoming culturally responsive educators.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, urban teaching, clinical experiences

Introduction

Urban teachers who approach teaching and learning with a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) are more effective in bridging the cultural gap that often exists between teachers and students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). This gap is widening as American students are increasingly ethnically and racially diverse and teachers remain chiefly White and female (Lewis & Toldson, 2013) making teacher preparation programs that stress the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy ever more important. This urgency is heightened in urban areas where high concentration of poverty coupled with limited school resources create additional challenges for teachers and students. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that teachers are well prepared to combat deficit thinking and disrupt the cycle of poverty by

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legitimizing students' cultures and enacting culturally responsive pedagogy to highlight student and community strengths and assets. Clinical experiences in urban schools embedded within teacher preparation programs have the potential to develop students' ability to become culturally responsive educators, yet it is unknown how these experiences contribute to teachers' development in enacting CRP.

The university in which this study took place has a strong commitment to preparing educators to teach in historically underserved urban schools. With this in mind, the teacher preparation programs emphasize culturally responsive pedagogy and placements in urban schools for clinical experiences to best prepare educators who better understand the complexities of urban education. Teacher candidates (TCs) who participate in extensive clinical experiences coupled with university coursework are better able to apply educational theory to support K-12 student learning in their classrooms (Koerner, & Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Goker, 2006). While we know that clinical experiences are an essential aspect of teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006), there is little clarity of how clinical experiences contribute to developing culturally responsive pedagogy. This study aims to highlight TCs' perspectives of how clinical experiences impacted their preparedness in becoming effective culturally responsive educators.

Conceptual Framework

This study draws upon sociocultural learning theory and culturally relevant pedagogy as theoretical frameworks. Sociocultural learning theory claims that the process of learning is shaped by social and cultural contexts and experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). The human mind, from the sociocultural perspective, is mediated by people's use of tools and signs as they engage in social activity to make sense of the world. The shared experiences that occur during such activities contribute to identity formation and perceptions of the self. The social and cultural factors, such as the school context, mentor teacher support, and interactions with students, greatly influence TCs' learning process. Ultimately, these experiences impact the teachers they become and how they perceive themselves as future educators. Teacher candidates have an active role in this learning process, and it is important that they recognize the unique aspects of their clinical work that may contribute to their feelings of preparedness as an educator.

Culturally responsive pedagogy aims to meet the needs of students by building on background, experiences and prior knowledge and welcoming this into the classroom and curriculum (Gay, 2010). Also known as culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) highlights three critical principles of CRP: Teachers must support students in achieving academic success, developing and/or maintaining cultural competence, and developing a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. To implement such a teaching approach, educators need to recognize the many assets that students have that can enhance the classroom learning environment and make learning meaningful. While all three of these principles are equally important, for many beginning teachers, a starting point for CRP is developing the first tenet as they focus on building relationships with their students and highlighting student and community assets in their curriculum. Clinical experiences provide an opportunity to observe and develop these necessary practices.

Methods

This article draws upon data from a larger mixed-methods descriptive study that employed surveys and focus groups to discover what aspects of clinical experiences influenced TCs' preparedness in becoming culturally responsive educators. Qualitative survey and focus group data are used to highlight their experiences and address the following research questions:

- What impact do clinical field experiences have on teacher candidates' feelings of preparedness in becoming effective culturally responsive educators?
- From the perspective of teacher candidates, what aspects of clinical field experiences contribute to or hinder their preparedness in becoming effective culturally responsive educators?

Participants and Context

This study is situated within a Midwest state university with a mission to collaborate with urban communities, schools, and families to provide a high quality education for all students. While urban education is often limited by inequitable allocation of resources, this college of education's vision is to prepare educators who understand the complexities of urban education, acknowledge and address the problems of inequality, and build on the assets that students bring to the classroom from their homes, families, and communities so all children may succeed academically. The university emphasizes a teaching philosophy that is both responsive and relevant to diverse students and their lived social, cultural, and economic realities.

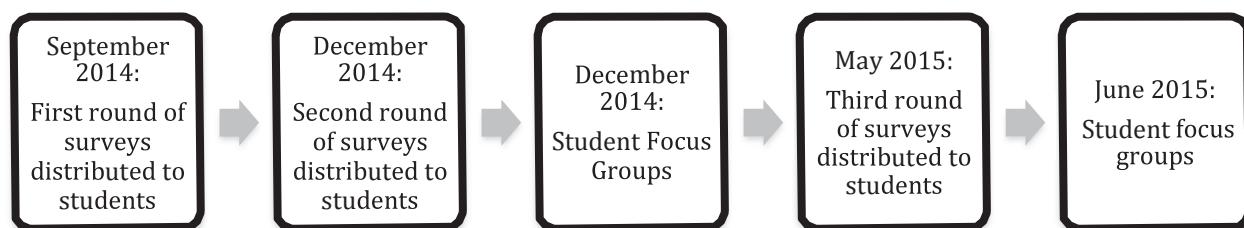
The university partners with an urban school district largely comprised of low-income African American and Latino students for teacher candidate school placements. Teacher candidate placements for Fall term clinical experiences and Spring term student teaching are carefully coordinated with schools and mentor teachers to provide the best match possible between TC and mentor teacher with regards to pedagogical approach aligned to university coursework, disposition, and commitment to meeting the professional growth and development of TCs. With these myriad factors to consider, TCs are placed in classrooms across the district for fall clinical experiences and spring student teaching. All elementary education candidates remain with the same mentor teacher for the academic year allowing them to develop relationships with their mentor teachers and students. Secondary education students have different mentor teacher and school placements for fall clinical experiences and spring student teaching, allowing them to experience varied school contexts across the academic year.

All university TCs (n= 80) in elementary and secondary education programs completing pre-student teaching in Fall 2014 and student teaching in Spring 2015 were eligible and recruited to participate in the study. A total of 21 chose to participate, including 13 secondary education TCs and eight elementary education TCs. Of these participants, eight were male and 13 female. Participants included 12 White students, three African American students and six Latino students. Beyond these gender, racial and ethnic demographics, the participants represented a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences.

Procedures

Qualitative data were collected during the 2014-15 academic year. A survey was developed to assess teacher candidates' perceptions of how clinical experiences impact their preparedness to enact CRP practices in the classroom. They completed the same survey three times throughout the academic year: before their clinical field experiences commenced in September 2014, after their field experiences in December 2014, and again in May 2015 after student teaching was complete. These three surveys gave TCs the opportunity to reflect on how their clinical experiences impacted their development of CRP over the academic year. Focus groups were employed to discuss initial survey findings in December 2014 and again in May 2015, allowing participants the opportunity to refute or support findings and add further insights. Figure 1 outlines the data collection procedures.

Figure 1: Data Collection Procedures



Data Analysis

Focus groups were transcribed and identifying information was masked to protect TCs' identities. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts and make any corrections providing accuracy and credibility to the qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). With the theoretical framework as a guide, focus group and survey data were explored to locate and assign codes to text segments in an effort to "form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (Creswell, 2013, p.243). These themes were then analyzed to reflect TCs' experiences in the field.

Results

Data analysis revealed noteworthy results regarding how TCs' clinical placements impacted their feelings of preparedness in developing culturally responsive pedagogy. In relation to Ladson-Billings' three tenets of CRP (1995, 2009), it was evident that TCs viewed culturally responsive teaching as emphasizing relationships with students and creating an asset based curriculum and instructional approach to obtain academic success. While they did not explicitly discuss the development of students' "cultural competence," many of them alluded to this concept. However, TCs did not mention the importance of facilitating the process of critical consciousness and becoming social change agents. TCs' focus on the first tenet was evident in the essential themes within the data, which include: connecting with students' cultures and communities, school and classroom context, and university coursework and field placement alignment. These themes are discussed in detail below.

Connecting with Students' Cultures and Communities

If the goal of CRP is to support urban youth through cultural connections, academic achievement, and personal empowerment, then TCs need to learn how to place student culture at the center of their teaching practices. Within this study, TCs highlighted the importance of having opportunities to make connections with K-12 students in authentic ways and better understand students' backgrounds and cultures. As one participant noted, "I feel like finding ways to relate to their lives and make the lessons relevant to them is the key to actually get any kind of interest in class." Another TC echoed this sentiment talking about how his field experiences gave him the time to connect with his students, "You actually have the time to get to know your students...All their interests and their needs. Being able to have the time to figure it out and to get to know them first. For me, that was helpful." TCs were able to make connections between students' lives and their teaching practice and recognized this critical component of CRP, as they developed understanding of students' cultures and experiences. Furthermore, TCs recognized that putting students' backgrounds at the center of their teaching contributed to successful teaching and learning experiences.

Other TCs took it a step further and discussed how connecting with their students gave them the opportunity to learn about integrating the community into student learning. "We talked about personal assets, community assets, all those kinds of things." A secondary Spanish teacher candidate agreed, noting how she made connections between her students and the surrounding community, "There's so many opportunities to go out and speak Spanish and do cultural things. It's easy to make those connections for me, to my students, because we live in an awesome city to speak Spanish." Opportunities to connect with students was of the utmost importance in their feelings of preparedness in enacting CRP as TCs learned to place their students' cultures, assets, and interests at the center of their teaching. Likewise, the school and classroom context proved to be an important factor in their ability to implement CRP.

School & Classroom Context

School and classroom context contributed to or hindered TCs' feelings of preparation in becoming culturally responsive teachers. Being provided with the right space with opportunities to practice and implement CRP and embed social justice practices into TC's teaching was highlighted as an important theme throughout this study.

Placement decisions. Teacher candidates were placed in schools by program faculty based on university-school partnerships. Participants reported that their lack of control over the school context was an important factor in their experiences. One TC noted, "It would have been good to be at a school that I had chosen so I could have felt comfortable during the experience." Another TC agreed, as she explains, "I wouldn't have chosen where I was placed. First of all it's hard for me to get there. The neighborhood wasn't so safe for me to walk in there." This overwhelming discomfort she felt inhibited her ability to connect with students and the community, which made it difficult for her to recognize and develop culturally responsive teaching practices. While program faculty's intention is to expose TCs to communities that will best prepare them to teach in historically underserved schools, some TCs struggled with the value and importance of their purposeful field placements.

Conversely, some participants appreciated being pushed "out of their comfort zone" and found that they had more opportunities to develop culturally responsive practices, as they

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recognized the importance of familiarizing themselves with their students, their backgrounds, and experiences. One TC pointed out, “I wouldn’t have chosen that school, but I learned so much from teaching in a diverse environment where social justice issues really matter.” Another concisely noted, “Having the right mentor-teacher really can make the difference.” Another TC respected the placement decision and said:

I'm so glad that they placed me there because I was able to get rid of ... of that fear and just getting into an unknown neighborhood and just knowing, you know, how to navigate the whole community made me feel a lot more prepared now if I am ever placed at a school that's similar demographics. And I'm going to be okay.

It is clear from the TCs’ comments that the context of the school and classroom had an impact on their opportunities to develop culturally responsive practices by using knowledge of students and their communities in their planning and teaching.

The “right” space. TCs voiced that they wanted to be deliberatively positioned in the “right” classrooms to experience and practice CRP. All TCs were placed in urban sites, yet urban schools span a wide spectrum and some TCs felt that their school context did not reflect the realities of teaching in urban schools. TCs highlighted the importance of completing their field experience in settings where they had the opportunity to be in a classroom that represented “a real urban school” as one participant described it. He went on to discuss the distinctions among placements, as even though all schools were in the same public district, some were more resourced than others and had more experienced teachers, which may not help prepare TCs if they secure teaching positions in less resourced schools with high teacher turnover. Another TC noted:

My placement school had a lot of challenges, but I got to experience so much and learn about connecting with students and create curriculum that connects to students. Being at that school helped me think about how to connect with students, really get to know them, and talk with them.

In order for teacher candidates to be best prepared to teach in urban schools, they need to be intentionally placed in classrooms that represent the diverse spectrum of urban students, giving them the opportunity to get to know their students, recognize their distinct assets and interests, and become familiar with the community. TCs who were placed in such schools described how this time gave them the opportunity to develop culturally responsive practices. One TC suggested, “I had the opportunity to connect with diverse students and highlight their culture and experiences in my curriculum.” There are distinct facets of teaching in urban schools, and some asserted that experiencing these during their field practicum helped them to construct their teaching practice as urban educators.

University Coursework and Field Placement Alignment

When there was a disconnect between TCs’ and mentor teachers’ pedagogical approaches, TCs’ learning experience was hindered. While university coursework highlighted the importance of culturally relevant curriculum, some TCs found themselves in classrooms

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where that wasn't the norm. This circumstance did not permit TCs to authentically enact CRP because their mentor teachers did not support them. One participant explained:

The field experience was ultimately not in a classroom that I controlled, so I could not always teach the way I would like and implement a lot of learned methods of inquiry. Without that application and experience, the understanding was greatly lessened.

While all TCs in this study completed a teacher education program emphasizing a teaching philosophy that is both responsive and relevant to diverse students and their lived social, cultural, and economic realities, not all TCs found themselves in schools that were aligned to this university mission.

Learning to teach in urban schools requires bridging theory and practice through thoughtful and purposeful school placements. Beyond appropriate school choice, mentor teacher selection and alignment to college mission and coursework is even more critical to allow TCs to develop pedagogical practices that empower students. If they are not in spaces where such practices are observed, they will not be able to authentically enact CRP. Culturally responsive teaching empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural connections to impact students' knowledge, skills and attitudes. When TCs were given the opportunity to complete clinical experiences in urban settings and create a bridge between coursework and fieldwork, students were more likely to feel prepared to enact these culturally relevant practices.

Implications and Conclusion

The results from this study provide insight into a small group of teacher candidates' perspectives and experiences in urban schools and the impact on them becoming culturally relevant educators. These findings may illustrate how programs can provide clinical experiences that support the development of culturally responsive pedagogy. CRP cannot be learned informally or haphazardly, but instead must be learned in schools and classrooms that value students' diverse cultures in connection with university programs that hold a strong commitment to educating students in historically underserved urban schools. With this in mind, it is necessary for teacher education programs to consider how to partner with urban schools and teachers to best prepare pre-service teachers to enact culturally relevant practices. It is critical that both parties (the university and K-12 placement school teachers) are on the same page and believe that the key to successfully teaching any student is to view their backgrounds and experiences as assets that can enhance and contribute to teaching and learning. Partnering with mentor teachers who have graduated from these elementary or secondary education programs is one step toward ensuring alignment. Spending more time in schools and classrooms observing teachers and providing thorough training opportunities for mentor teachers are additional ways to work toward better synergy. These strategies will create more successful opportunities for TCs to develop the necessary skills in becoming culturally responsive teachers.

A key finding in this study was teacher candidates experiencing what some call "praxis shock" (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Gold, 1996) or the discrepancy between teachers' expectations and the realities of teaching. These incongruities between TCs' own schooling experiences and university coursework and their school placement site are crucial to understanding not only how the context of school placements can impact TCs' ability to develop

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and enact CRP practices, but also how teacher education programs can contribute to preparation prior to clinical experiences. Teacher educators need to consider how to best prepare teachers to teach in urban settings before placing them in schools and classrooms where they are likely to experience praxis shock. While clinical experiences are at the crux of developing CRP, embedding CRP throughout university coursework is also key in providing TCs with the necessary skills to teach in student centered classrooms and employ CRP in today's diverse classrooms. Additionally, incorporating time and space at the university for TCs to examine their own attitudes, beliefs, histories, and biases gives TCs the opportunity to acknowledge differences and come to a greater understanding and appreciation of diversity within a classroom.

Another key finding in this study emphasized the incomplete understanding and application of CRP, as TCs only alluded to and did not acknowledge the second and third tenets: developing and/or maintaining cultural competence, and developing a critical consciousness through which students challenge the status quo of the current social order. Because TCs and beginning teachers are on a learning trajectory, it is important that they expand their definition of CRP to expand beyond building relationships with students and teaching with curriculum and strategies that build off of student assets. While these are vital to ensuring student success and learning, the latter tenets are just as critical. Early career teachers must continue their learning by having an effective mentor that exemplifies CRP, observing veteran teachers that enact complete culturally responsive pedagogy, and attending professional development that contributes to development of truly inclusive and empowering teaching practices.

The educational and political debates over the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs are far from new. It is widely recognized that there is a need to reexamine such programs to best prepare teachers for high needs urban schools as many teachers in urban settings often report that their teacher education program did not fully prepare them to meet the needs of their diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In the current political context of education reform, the urgency to improve teacher education programs cannot be ignored and the nation's changing demographics demand that teacher education programs meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. This study adds to the discussion of how teacher education programs can best prepare future educators to be effective teachers in urban schools and emphasize culturally relevant pedagogy. As such, this study can give clarity to this complex issue, and suggests the need to engage in future research that emphasizes TCs' perspectives to inform how to best prepare educators to meet the demands of teaching in our urban schools.

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